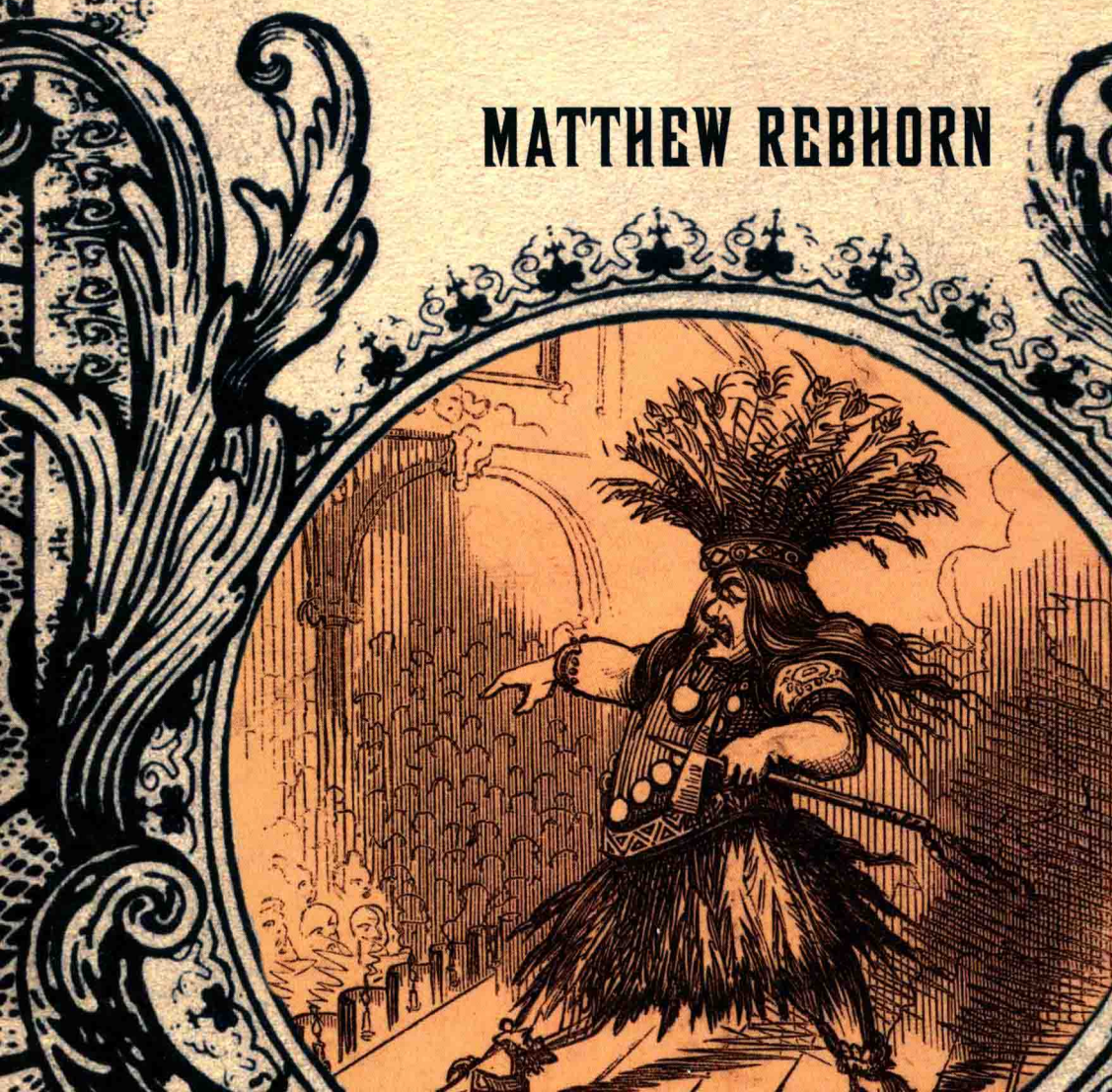


PIONEER PERFORMANCES

STAGING THE FRONTIER

MATTHEW REBHORN



Pioneer
Performances
Staging the Frontier

—  —
Matthew Rebhorn



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Pioneer Performances

*To Mom and Dad,
and
Alexandra,
for extending my frontiers*

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Pioneer Performances

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INTRODUCTION



Manifest Destinies

Buffalo Bill, Gowongo Mohawk, and the Genealogy of American Frontier Performance

One of the most provocative moments in the story of the American frontier and in the history of American performance never actually occurred, though it easily might have. Frederick Jackson Turner, the historian most closely identified with the frontier throughout the twentieth century,¹ and William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody, the sensational performer who essentially invented the western as a performative genre, were both in Chicago in 1893 for the World’s Columbian Exposition.² It was at this same cultural event that Turner delivered his famous lecture on the closing of the American frontier—the essay that would help crystallize what has become known as the Turner Thesis—while not half a mile from the midway, Buffalo Bill was performing in his celebrated show, *Wild West*.

Turner’s ideas about the frontier were shared, of course, by a number of other nineteenth-century historians. Francis Parkman, for instance, had penned an eight-volume history of his own encounters and observations on the Oregon Trail, starting before the Civil War and with the last volume published just a year before Turner’s address. “Like George Bancroft before him,” Joy S. Kasson relates, “Parkman worked within a framework that celebrated the triumph of Anglo-Saxon conquest and saw English, and later American, domination of North America as a story of the progress of civilization over savagery and the extension of freedom over the continent.”³ Even amateur historians, like Theodore Roosevelt, had expounded on the frontier’s symbolic values in his four-volume *The Winning of the West*

(1889–1896), and yet it was Turner's definition of what the frontier meant to Americans at the meeting of the American Historical Association at the 1893 exposition that has captured the minds of critics.⁴ So initially successful was the thesis among historians, as Rosemarie K. Bank relates, that, by the 1930s, "the American Historical Association was branded one great Turner-variant."⁵ Perhaps one of the reasons that Turner's definition of the frontier has been so highly popular is its simplicity. "The frontier is the outer edge of the wave" of American advancement across the continent, Turner wrote, "the meeting point between savagery and civilization."⁶ For Turner, the frontier is a world of easily discernible binaries, a line clearly separating who "we" are from who "they" are, who is civilized from who is savage, not a "middle ground," as Richard White has suggested, or a "contact zone," as Mary Louise Pratt has argued.⁷

Moreover, for Turner, the clarity of this line helps us see more distinctly the genesis of the American character, for it is the "line of the most rapid and effective Americanization" (3–4). In the "crucible of the frontier," he argues, immigrants and other "foreigners" are forged into Americans, that is, "a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics" (23). Turner also then obliges us by outlining exactly what those new frontier characteristics of Americans are:

The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them. (37)

Hearing these American traits—coarseness, strength, practicality, energy, individualism—expounded on in Chicago in 1893 audience members at Turner's lecture were encouraged to merge their ideas of what constituted an American with what defined the frontier. How they defined the frontier became synonymous with how they identified and defined themselves. As Turner put it: "This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character" (2–3).

The audience members would have also heard Turner's tacit invitation to further conquest and domination even as the frontier, in his words, was coming to a close. If the effectiveness of the Turner Thesis is at least partially due to its simplicity, then his paean to conquest comes as a natural outgrowth of the American frontier's drive toward "incessant expansion." "Movement has been its dominant fact," he concludes about the American nation, and so it is natural and expected that its citizens will continue to push that line of civilization beyond the continent, that "the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise" (37). The Turner Thesis thus became just another name for Manifest Destiny and went hand in hand with the U.S. government's seizure, just five years later, of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, Wake Island, and Manila, as well as the suppression of a colonial uprising in the Philippines that would last from 1899 well into 1902. The Turner Thesis would become most pointedly enacted in 1903 when Turner's fellow author, Theodore Roosevelt, then president of the United States, assisted Panamanian separatists to dissolve their bonds with the Colombian government in exchange for American rights to extra-territoriality over the Canal Zone.⁸ The American people—at least as represented by Roosevelt's political maneuverings—had, indeed, demanded and seized a "wider field" for the implementation of their frontier ideology.

While fervently opposed to the kind of academic elitism of Turner, Cody and his Wild West nevertheless proved a perfect ideological mate for Turner in 1893. For the thirty years from 1883 to 1916, Buffalo Bill's Wild West was one of the nation's largest, most popular, and most successful performative ventures (Slotkin 66–67), and part of its popularity no doubt sprang from the way, as Paul Reddin notes, it "provided a simplified, patriotic, and believable national epic that blended history and mythology and legitimized the view of Manifest Destiny that sanctioned the use of force."⁹ If we turn to some of the material Cody used to promote his show, we see a striking parallel with the same ideas that Turner was proposing just a few hundred yards away in Chicago in 1893. From the program for the show, for example, we can read the following:

[While it is] a trite saying that "the pen is mightier than the sword," it is equally true that the bullet is the pioneer of civilization, for it had gone hand in hand with the axe that cleared the forest, and with the family Bible and school book. Deadly as has been its mission in one sense, it has been merciful in another; for without the rifle ball we of America would not be to-day in possession of a free and united country, and mighty in our strength. (qtd. in Slotkin 77)

While Kasson argues that Cody and Turner disagreed about the idea of the frontier as a "process" and that Turner insisted on a much more

fluid notion of the frontier and the way it necessarily changed the settler (119), it seems clear that while the nature of that process was not identical, that like Turner, Buffalo Bill's Wild West positioned Cody as the embodiment of the frontiersman who had "passed through every stage of frontier life," as Turner argued the true pioneer did. "The notion," argues Warren, "that the frontier developed in 'stages' was never more explicit than in the show's first indoor performance, in 1886," where the frontier as process was evidenced by the show's billing as "A History of American Civilization" (51). Like Turner, therefore, Cody also suggests that the frontier is not a place so much as a process in which "civilization" meets "savagery" and conquers it. Also like Turner, Buffalo Bill gestures to the ways in which the frontier is responsible for Americanizing the nation, for if there were no frontier, Cody's logic insists, then there would not be a "free and united country." Turner and Cody part company, however, in Cody's making explicit and spectacular what Turner keeps implicit: the use of violence in the "civilizing" endeavor.¹⁰ As Cody demonstrated every time he performed his acts of marksmanship and every time he staged the violent rebuffing of the raid on the Deadwood Stagecoach by Native Americans, violence is crucial to the frontier: As he succinctly puts it, the "bullet is the pioneer of civilization."

If Turner lectured about Manifest Destiny, drawing simple connections between the American character and his understanding of the frontier, Cody turned those lectures into tangible, performative events providing equally simplistic responses of sympathy for heroism and repulsion at villainy. If Turner turned a blind eye to the violence that would necessarily accompany the Americanization of the continent, Cody threw a spotlight on it, reveled in it, and, if his experience in Chicago in 1893 is any gauge, profited from it.¹¹

While Cody's application to perform at the exposition had been denied, Cody drew on his showman's chutzpah and set up his show just outside the fairground, in effect, extending the boundary of the exposition to encompass his enormous production. It was, ironically, on this frontier that Cody would perform for nearly six million people, many of whom saw the production numerous times. The 22,000-seat arena was continuously sold out for nearly the entire time Cody was in Chicago, making the Chicago season, with its 186 days of continuous performance from April 26 to October 31, 1893, the most successful one of the tour's run to that point (see Bank 603). To give some perspective, it is worth noting that, as of today, Madison Square Garden in New York City has a seating capacity of more than 2,000 seats fewer than Cody's Wild West entertainment in Chicago in 1893. Moreover, unlike any contemporary performance at Madison Square Garden, Cody's act began as soon as all of the seats were filled, leaving thou-

sands of people still clamoring to get in. One reporter estimated that the crowds spent \$150,000 a week at the show and that Cody and his partner, Nate Salsbury, made \$1 million in Chicago during the performance (Reddin 118–119).

Turner must have been aware of Buffalo Bill's Wild West as a cultural force. Like the other historians at the American Historical Association meeting, he was invited to attend the Wild West on the afternoon of July 12. There is no historical record that suggests that Turner took Cody up on his invitation, nor is there any mention in Turner's works of why he chose to forgo seeing Buffalo Bill. Joy S. Kasson suggests that Turner skipped the show "since he was hard at work completing the speech he would give that very night" (120). At the same time, there is equally no evidence to suggest that Cody was in the audience for Turner's lecture. One might suppose that at least one reason why Cody would not have attended the lecture was that he was the star attraction of his own production and could not spare the time. However, like Turner, he left no record providing his rationale. In a titillating irony, therefore, the two "master narrators of American westering," as Richard White calls them, were exploring similar themes in virtually the same place at the same time, and yet, even though it would never be easier for them to meet, they never did ("Turner" 7–8).

While it is tantalizing to think about how Buffalo Bill's figurative opening of the frontier would have affected Turner, the man who had just spoken of how the historical frontier was coming to a "close," I am not interested in speculating about what might have happened or what could have been in 1893 or how they became the "master narrators" of the American frontier.¹² What I am interested in, instead, is exploring how American history and performance—the history of American performance, that is, as well as the performance of American history—are inextricably linked by their shared fixation on an idea of the frontier, a space, moreover, that is thematically richer, more diverse, and more radical than has been previously supposed. What the great frontier historian's failure to meet the great frontier performer suggests symbolically, in other words, is that this is not a simple narrative. At this point in the narrative, we see another story waiting to be told, one that is distinct and different from the one leading to Turner's and Cody's. This story is one that demands telling, for it does not smooth the path of empire, as does Turner's and Cody's. Rather, throughout most of the nineteenth century, it interrupted, interrogated, and derailed the stories those two men told.

Pioneer Performances tells this story, and in doing so, it works in two directions simultaneously. It capitalizes on the legacy of New Western Historians like Patricia Nelson Limerick and Susan Lee Johnson who have

deftly problematized the Turner Thesis, while not simply rehearsing their arguments. Rather, as I will demonstrate when discussing the performative history of Cody's contemporary Gowongo Mohawk, this study defines a different version of frontier performance that addresses the shortcomings of New Western History as well as argues for a new historical formation, what I will be calling New Western Genealogy.

Likewise, just as I will use the genealogy of performing the frontier to problematize frontier history, I will use that same genealogy to limn a more multifaceted story of the American theater. By bringing the representation of the frontier in American drama to the surface and analyzing its shifting aesthetic formations, we will discover an American theater that used its critical engagement with the dominant representation of the frontier we see in Buffalo Bill's Wild West and the Turner Thesis to explore alternative constructions of ideology and nationalism. Moreover, it also used the critical energy it generated from tackling the dominant representation of the frontier to move the American performative aesthetic down new avenues, from playwriting to scenic technology to acting stylistics. In the speculative gap that exists between Frederick Jackson Turner's missed meeting with Buffalo Bill Cody, in other words, emerges a new model of the frontier whose genealogical "counter-memory," to use Foucault's term,¹³ not only recodes what constitutes frontier history but also reconfigures the political and aesthetic shape of the history of American drama.

GOWONGO MOHAWK'S FREE WEST

As a cultural figure, Gowongo Mohawk's name is as unfamiliar as Buffalo Bill's is commonplace. Yet at exactly the same time that Buffalo Bill's Wild West was at the height of its popularity, this Native American actress, the supposed daughter of the famous Senecan orator and leader, Red Jacket,¹⁴ was incredibly popular, selling out shows from cities like Chicago, Baltimore, and Philadelphia to more rural centers like Wheeling, West Virginia, and Iowa City, Iowa. Cody's fame was firmly established when he took his show to Europe, so that the European audiences might, in Cody's terms, "esteem us better." Mohawk's celebrated play, *Wep-Ton-No-Mah, the Indian Mail Carrier*, also made the similar jump to Europe after a successful American run.¹⁵

Mohawk's play involved swashbuckling knife fights, sensational physical feats, rodeo tricks during a stampede, and perhaps most intriguing of all, the startling enactment of all of these things by Mohawk, who cross-dressed to star as the Indian youth Wep-ton-no-mah, who participates in a version of the Pony Express. Attracted by this strange mixture of elements, audiences

flocked to see her perform. One reviewer noted that the Kensington Theatre in Philadelphia was “crowded and the enthusiastic audience cheered and applauded the star and her company to the echo,”¹⁶ while the *Wheeling Register* in West Virginia, noting that Mohawk was about to give her last local performance, remonstrated with its reading public that “those who have not yet seen her should not fail to do so.”¹⁷ There can be little doubt, therefore, that Mohawk’s performance was popular, and while I am not suggesting that it was as popular as Buffalo Bill’s Wild West—few performative events were—what I am suggesting is that she, too, was staging the frontier for large audiences during nearly the same decades that the Wild West was entertaining them.

One might argue that Mohawk’s popularity was generated in the same frontier forge that Buffalo Bill’s was, that people flocked to see her spectacular displays of riding, knife play, and physical action for the same reasons that they flocked to see his show. At one level, of course, this is true: Both performers mounted spectacular representations of the frontier in their shows, using real horses and real guns to give an air of verisimilitude to their frontier representations.¹⁸ Yet, if we focus on the ways gender and the body were deployed in both productions, we can see a distinct difference between them, a difference that complicates considerably the history of frontier performance.

One of the most productive ways of gauging the differences between the two pieces is to place the two leading actresses of both productions side by side. In other words, I want to compare Mohawk with the Wild West’s most famous actress, Annie Oakley. Annie Oakley’s role in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was vitally important, for it offered female audience members a figure with whom to identify—and that, as Cody well knew, meant more profit. Yet, while the lure of lucre drove Cody to include Oakley, the problem of gender identification needed to be managed, for to attract the kind of clientele Cody wanted, he had to counter Oakley’s inherent aggressiveness and violence that made her a star by coupling it with a more feminine and “ladylike” demeanor.

Annie Oakley dazzled people by firing shotguns and a .22 caliber rifle, hitting stationary targets, shattering airborne clay pigeons, and, most spectacularly, splitting playing cards length-wise. Nevertheless, her entrance was always a “pretty one.” “She never walked,” Dexter Fellows, longtime press agent for the Wild West, noted. “She tripped in, bowing, waving, and wafting kisses,” and while her shooting in the beginning would often bring forth “a few screams of fright from the women,” she quickly “set the audience at ease” (qtd. in Warren 247). She was violent, but her violence was domesticated, cosseted to ease the tension that existed between her conflicting gender figurations. Her domestication was visualized for the audience in

the dresses she wore in all of the posters she appeared in and even in the arena itself, where she always performed in women's clothing. Moreover, she underscored her family ties—and her thorough domestication—by traveling and appearing with her husband, Frank Butler, and included their pet dog in her act. Perhaps most telling of all, when she rode and performed feats from horseback, she always rode sidesaddle which was “considered,” as Paul Reddin writes, “the right choice for a proper lady of that day” (71). Part of Annie Oakley's allure involved her feats of violence, acts traditionally associated with the masculine sphere, but her performance could attract audiences, and especially women, because it demonstrated how completely tamed this “wild” woman of the frontier was. She might be able to fire a rifle, but her petticoats, like her pets, registered how safe she was, how clear and convincing her domestic proclivities were, and while she took up the reins, she was, as Louis Warren maintains, “the Wild West show's most powerful symbol of domesticity, her combination of marksmanship, femininity, temperance, and frugality a huge marketing asset for a show of border life” (249).

Imagine, then, how audience members might have reacted to Gowongo Mohawk, who did not enter wafting kisses or bowing but made her entrance with “fearless riding,” which, it is crucial to note, she executed “without saddle or bridle.”¹⁹ While both Oakley and Mohawk performed roles that destabilized gender, Oakley rode sidesaddle during her feats of horsemanship to insure her audience understood how essentialized her gender was, how a “domestic goddess,” in short, was handling that rifle. The cross-dressed Mohawk, by contrast, defied these conventions by not merely giving up the feminized sidesaddle but in forgoing any saddle whatsoever. Rather than manage the threat to gender identity she provided for her audience, as Oakley did, Mohawk deliberately threw out a skein of problematic gender signifiers for her audience.²⁰ Despite these problematic gender signifiers, audiences nevertheless found her, as one reviewer in Baltimore in 1892 mentions, “an exceedingly captivating character.”²¹

The fact that Mohawk performed a murky gender identity and was, at the same time, alluring speaks to the idea that it was exactly her imbricated notion of gender that made her captivating. This is, of course, true of Annie Oakley as well, but what distinguished these two figures is the way they managed the gender anxiety their performances created. Oakley played it down with her dresses, while Mohawk intensified it with her cross-dressing; this is a difference of degree, in other words, rather than a difference in kind. Consider how one reviewer described Mohawk. He begins by noting that “[o]n the stage Miss Mohawk is magnetic in manner, fertile in imagination and quick in giving her imagining expression through the medium of a rich and musical voice—a voice that is deep, thrilling and intense in its